

Never Forget

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****Angst, angst all around. Did I mention angst? John/Kelly friendship. Implied Kelly/Fred.**

* * *

><p>It is quiet here.<p>

Even the wind is silent, though John can see trees rustling in the distance.

In front of him, the Voi memorial stands. A Pelican wing stands protectively over the now-permanent structure. There are pictures of those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice. Service medals are now protected in a glass case that stands before the wing.

It is the large "117" that is carved in the side of the wing that catches his attention.

He moves up the steps, wondering who bothered to do such a thing.

John's eyes move over the memorial, pausing to honor Captain and Commander Keyes. A heaviness settles over him. Reluctantly, he continues his survey. When he sees Johnson's photo, he has to look away.

Out of everyone he had met during the Halo campaign, Johnson was the closest thing he had to a friend.

Except for Cortana.

A familiar ache presses on him. It has been three weeks since the Composer had been destroyed, but he is still mourning her.

He scans the memorial, looking for her place of honor among the heroes. But there is nothing. No signs that she had ever been part of the Halo campaign.

"Most people see me as a technological marvel," she had said after the confrontation with Del Rio on the bridge. "A computer program. Nothing more."

"You're more than that," he had replied stiffly.

"To you, yes."

Words had eluded him after that.

But, in the end, it seems as though she had been right after all.

Not any longer.

Her service, her commitment to protecting humanity, her sacrifice needs to be remembered.

He reaches down and pulls out his seldom used combat knife. With a quick hop over the barrier, he approaches the Pelican wing. Right below his service number, he begins his new mission.

When he was about halfway through, he knows someone is watching him. He knows exactly who it is. If he hadn't, he may have stopped.

Instead, he turns his full attention to the matter at hand.

It takes him less than ten minutes to finish his objective. He looks at the crudely carved 0452-9 under his service number and can almost hear Cortana speaking, "It's about time_ somebody _recognized me for my work._"

Moments later, footsteps approach him from behind.

"I thought I might find you here."

Kelly.

He hasn't seen any of his surviving Spartan brothers or sisters since he arrived back in Earth at the request -demand- of ONI. He wonders if they know about Kelly's presence.

"We knew you weren't..." Her voice trails off. She waits until he climbs back over the barrier before speaking again. "We knew you'd be back."

"Not all of us." He still can't say Cortana's name. Not with the guilt weighing on him.

"John..." She takes a step towards him. He sees her hesitate slightly before placing a hand on his arm. "These things take time. You know that."

Of course he does. He mourned the death of Sam for years and turned that grief into the determination that propelled him to ruthlessly fight against the Covenant.

He lets her arm fall away from him. "I'll be fine." He isn't sure if the lie is for the benefit of Kelly or himself.

He looks at her and notices that for the first time since he has known her, her hair is starting to grow out. So much has changed while he slept in his hushed casket among the stars.

Decades of knowing him allow Kelly to pick up on his line of thinking. "Things _are _different now." There is a wistfulness to her voice. "Halsey is in prison."

John nods. Lasky had told him his about the doctor's fate when he had asked to contact her, to tell her about what happened to Cortana.

"The three of us, Fred, Linda, and I, were formally discharged from the UNSC after she was arrested, given a payout -recompense, the UNSC had said - and forced to leave the only life we have known behind for the sakes of making sure we were out of ONI's hair. Admiral Parangosky has done what she can to ensure none of us ever see the battlefield again," Kelly continues.

She looks at the memorial. "Linda had the hardest time with it. She tends to disappear for months at a time. Fred and I...we're trying to make the best of things." John catches the glimmer of gold around her left ring finger.

Another change to adapt to, John thinks.

"I doubt the ONI is going to relieve you from duty. You're somewhat of a legend now." She gives him an apologetic smile. She knows he has never been about the praise and fame. "You did save the universe after all."

He stiffens. "Cortana's role was pivotal. She held on the Index. She saved me from the Didact." His gaze shifted downward. "I didn't do it alone."

Kelly appraises him for a second. "You're different too, you know." An awkward silence settles between the longtime friends. "_She_ changed you."

Her accusation rattles him. "The attack on Reach and everything that happened after is what changed me."

Her eyes travel to where he carved Cortana's serial number. "Are you sure about that?"

"I don't want anyone to ever forget what she did." Defensiveness creeps into his voice.

"They won't." She paused. "She'll be remembered with the

others."

"They'll see her as more than a machine." The words are mumbled, but she hears them nonetheless.

She looks at him curiously. "Yes."

For the first time in months, the shrouds of guilt loosen their grip on him. He looks up to the heavens where Cortana had sacrificed herself to save him and the others on Earth.

He may not have been able to save her, John, but he has kept her memory alive. She will be remembered amongst the heroes that she had fought alongside with.

She will be remembered by humanity.

She will be remembered by the UNSC.

She will be remembered by John.

She will be remembered.

Welcome home, Cortana.

End
file.